

# Immigration goes back to style of '50s

## 447 arrive in Haifa by ship from Odessa

**YIGAL KOTZER**

**HAIFA** — As wind shrieked through the superstructure and rain poured down on the gangplanks, 447 immigrants from the former Soviet Union disembarked Friday afternoon from the ship that had brought them here from Odessa. It was the first such operation since the current wave of immigration began two years ago.

The immigrants on deck applauded and waved to those awaiting them on shore, as four tug boats pulled the golden-hulled Greek liner Mediterranean Sky into Haifa bay. One immigrant on board sounded a *shofar*.

To some on shore, it was a scene reminiscent of the country's early days, when most immigrants arrived by ship. But others took a less romantic view.

Jewish Agency head Simcha Din-itz said he did not "want to spoil the euphoria," but found it "logistically stupid to be engaging in such operations."

But Absorption Minister Yitzhak Peretz said the sea route had advantages and could become a new channel for transporting immigrants.

Peretz was among those on hand to greet the newcomers, along with dozens of Absorption Ministry and Jewish Agency workers. As Peretz boarded the ship, he was given a kiss by one new arrival.

"I am so happy to be here, far away from Russia," said Sophia Murdava, 45, an English teacher from Tbilisi, capital of the embattled new country of Georgia. "When I first saw the coastline of Israel from the ship, I was so choked up I couldn't speak. I believe that everything will be good here; it has to be good."

Haifa Mayor Arye Gurel gathered up several of the new olim and gave them a short Hebrew lesson.

Each immigrant was allowed to bring 250 kg. of belongings with him, and the hold of the ship was packed with more than 5,200 suitcases. But the newcomers were instructed to take only one suitcase each with them to a Netanya hotel, where they were to spend their first days here. Absorption Ministry workers are to collect the 5,200 suitcases today and distribute them to their owners. A fleet of taxis will transport them to their new homes throughout the country.

The newcomers also brought 29 new cars with them, most of the Russian models, but a few from other European manufacturers.

The Mediterranean Sky was chartered by the Ebenezer Emergency



**Helping hands for new arrivals.**

(IPPA)

Fund, a British-based Evangelical Christian group, and organized by Ofek Aliya or Ride To Freedom, a private Israeli-based group.

"This is a great day for us because we're happy that Jews are coming to Israel," said Steven Lightle, head of the group. "We want every Jew in the world to come to Israel because we believe that the Messiah will only come if we act in accordance with what is written in Isaiah 60:8-9, where it says that gentiles have to help Jews come to Israel on ships. This is what will bring the Messiah."

Lightle said his group intends to fund the travel of thousands of Jews from Russia by ship. He insisted that his organization had no intention of missionizing among the newcomers. "As soon as they get here, we sever all contact with them," he said, adding that Ebenezer had already funded the aliya of several hundred Soviet Jews by air, via Bucharest.

Peretz defended accepting help from a Christian organization. "So what if a Christian group funds us. The US government gives us \$1.5 billion every year. This is not a missionary group."

Absorption Ministry workers, police and customs agents were aboard

the Mediterranean Sky during its voyage, during which they registered the olim and gave them new immigrant certificates.

"The authorities in the port of Odessa were very nasty," said one ministry worker. "It was very disturbing."

The authorities wouldn't let the Israelis off the ship in Odessa, the worker said.

"Yes, we had a lot of problems in Odessa," Lightle agreed.

In the arrivals hall, Haifa high school pupils passed out sandwiches, fruit and drinks to the newcomers. "There's good food here, not like in Russia," said one immigrant. "We had planned our aliya for three years, and had intended to buy train tickets. But when we heard about the ship, we packed everything immediately and set out for Odessa. Things are very bad for the Jews there," she added, picking up another bottle of orange drink.

As the olim began to file onto the 11 buses that were to take them to their Netanya hotel before Shabbat, several other Russian families were seen standing at one side of the hall. They were waiting to board the ship.

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